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# The impact of foreign relations between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab Gulf states on African migrants in the region

Dirk Kohnert <sup>1</sup>

*Silence is profitable: South African – Saudi Arabia cooperation* <sup>2</sup>



Source: cartoon © [Rico Schacherl](#), *Twitter*, 18 October 2018

**Abstract:** As early as 1991, Ali Mazrui argued that the Red Sea was not suitable for separating Africa from Arabia. For the two were inextricably intertwined through languages, religions (particularly Islam) and identities in both the Sahara and the Red Sea in a historical fusion of Arabism and African identity. Their separation was closely linked to a broader trend in which the white world closed ranks and created a system of global apartheid. The historical origins of the Africa-Middle East divide, i.e. the views of the Red Sea and the Sahara as racial and civilizational boundaries created by European Enlightenment ideology and early colonial expansionism were reinforced by postcolonial authoritarian regimes and Cold War rivalries, as well as by nationalist currents in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates increasingly viewed the Horn of Africa as their ‘Western security flank’. They were united in their desire to prevent the growing influence of Turkey, Iran and Qatar in this part of the world. These Gulf rivalries formed the basis for growing economic cooperation with SSA as well as military support and security alliances, particularly in the Horn of Africa. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which together have become the largest Gulf investors in Africa, compete with each other, particularly with Qatar, which has established embassies in most SSA countries. In addition, state and non-state actors from the Middle East and North Africa were closely involved in the destabilization of the Sahel in the 2010s by providing military, intelligence and ideological support to SSA states and terrorist groups. On the other hand, the Gulf States became increasingly dependent on migrant labour and the steady increase in migration from SSA to these countries, was reinforced by the massive influx from African migrant-sending countries given the restrictions on African migration to Europe. As early as the seventh century AD, Arabia had relied heavily on the slave trade and the supply of labour from SSA, founded on the philosophy that it was legitimate to enslave black people because they were no better than animals. During this time, Black Africa became the largest slave depot in the Islamic world. To this day, there are significant African migrant and diaspora communities in the Middle East. Their presence has at times helped to perpetuate long-standing derogatory views and attitudes towards Africa and its peoples. These attitudes, based on an Arab-centric social hierarchy and expressing contempt for African cultures, remain prevalent today and shape social relationships between employers and African migrants in the emirates of the Arabian Peninsula.

**Keywords:** [GCC](#), [Middle East](#), [Arabian Peninsula](#), [Arab states of the Persian Gulf](#), [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [Red Sea](#), [Horn of Africa](#), [Yemen](#), [Arab Spring](#), [Sahel](#), [Islamic terrorism](#), [Arab slave trade](#), [Arab nationalism](#), [Islam](#), [Culture of Africa](#), [migrant workers](#), [human trafficking](#), [forced labour](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Somalia](#), [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#), [Turkey](#), [Iran](#), [Afro-Arabs](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), [UAE](#), [Qatar](#), [Oman](#), [African Studies](#)

**JEL-Code:** D31, D62, D72, D74, E26, F22, F35, F51, F52, F53, F54, F55, H12, H56, N47, Z13

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<sup>2</sup> “SouthAfrica government quiet on #SaudiArabia human rights abuses ...”, © [Rico Schacherl](#), *Twitter* (X), Cartoon for @eNCA, 18.October 2018.

# 1. Introduction

**Cartoon 2:** *Saudi and Qatari division of labour in Africa*



Source: © [Khalid Cherradi](#), *Africa-Cartoons*, 7. June 2017

In light of the current [Arab-Israeli conflict](#) over [Israel's ongoing invasion of the Gaza Strip](#), Israel's Africa policy (Kohnert, 2023b), as well as that of the [Arab states](#), has become particularly important, if only to gain supporters, for example in [UN](#) votes. The impact of the foreign relations of the Arab states of the Middle East on [sub-Saharan Africa](#) and on [African migrants](#) in the [Arab Gulf states](#), as represented by the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC), i.e. without Iraq and Kuwait, will be analysed below.

**Graph 1:** *Map of the Arab countries bordering the Persian Gulf*



Source: © SpLoT, Sudopeople, [Gulf Cooperation Council](#), Wikipedia

The [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) with its headquarters in [Riyadh](#) (the capital of Saudi Arabia) was created in 1981 by the Arab monarchies of the [Arabian Peninsula](#), [Bahrain](#), [Kuwait](#), [Oman](#), [Qatar](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and the [United Arab Emirates](#). The GCC's interests in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) (SSA) were initially motivated by its determination to curb Israel's links with countries on the continent. Also, the GCC wanted, because of the rise in oil prices following the 1973 Arab-Israeli [Yom Kippur War](#), to limit the hardship on those African developing countries whose support they sought in their diplomatic struggle with Israel

(Kohnert, 2023b). With the growing involvement of the Islamic Republic of [Iran](#) in Africa and its fomenting the [Shia–Sunni divide](#), particularly the [Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy conflict](#), as well as the changing political dynamics of the post-Cold War world, issues of mutual security, investment and trade with African countries became increasingly important (Bishku, 2022). However, there exist significant differences between [China](#), another major investor in SSA, and the GCC countries in terms of [FDI](#) outflows to SSA. GCC countries seem to be driven mainly by food security and religious ambitions, while Chinese companies tend to go to countries that are rich in natural resources. These differences are mainly due to the background characteristics of the two economies and political systems (Koku & Farha, 2020).

## 2. History and main drivers of GCC’s relations with SSA

The Saudi state's external activities in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), particularly in [West Africa](#), including [Nigeria](#), with by far the largest Muslim population in SSA, began in earnest with the advent of oil revenues in the 1950s and accelerated with the establishment of international organisations in the 1960s and 1970s. They coincided with a period of heightened anti-colonial struggle in West Africa. This context increased the attractiveness of an Islamic path to self-determined modernity, with Saudi Arabia as one of several possible role models (Freitag, 2022). Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has poured billions of dollars through official and non-governmental channels into funding and promoting religious activities and Islamic causes in SSA. It propagated [Wahhabism](#), the particularly rigid and austere form of Islam associated with the kingdom's religious establishment, within Muslim communities in almost every country (Østebø, 2022). Saudi Arabia's impact on Muslims throughout the world was less visible than that of Khomeini's Iran, but the effect was deeper and more enduring (Kepel, 2006).

**Graph 2: Arabia and the history of Wahhabism**



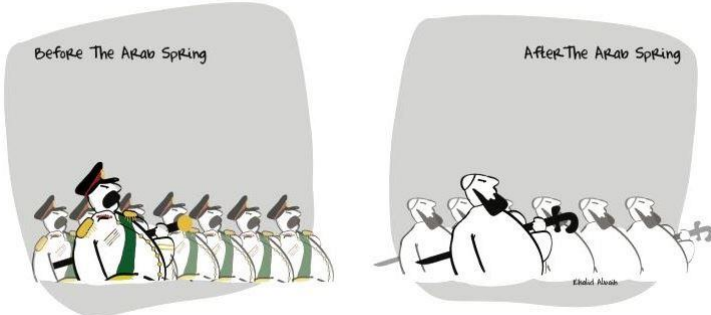
Source: © [Osborne, Thomas, d. 1767](#) [Erondele, Pierre, fl. 1586-1609, tr.](#) from: [History of Wahhabism](#), en.Wikipedia



Middle East and [North African](#) actors, both state and non-state, were also closely implicated in the destabilization of the [Sahel](#) in the 2010s, including providing military, intelligence, and ideological support to [West African](#) states and terrorist groups (Coates, 2023).

While the UAE and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia were in rivalry with Turkey in recent years the political situation became far more complex with Qatar also attempting to increase its presence in Africa by investing in the creation of its embassies all over the continent. Of Middle Eastern countries involved in the region, only Turkey has more embassies (Bishku, 2022).

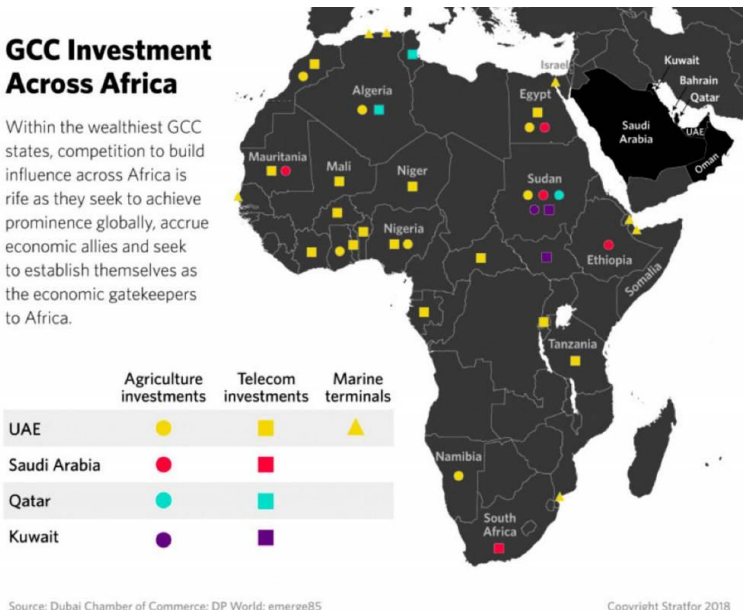
**Cartoon 3:** *Before and after the Arab Spring: Military rulers replaced by Mullahs*



Source: © [Khalid Albaih](#), Albaih, 2020

Moreover, in the wake of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), there were signs of a shifting relationship indicating a broadening of mutual diplomatic and economic ties and emerging partnerships to the benefit of both the [Arab states of the Persian Gulf](#) and [sub-Saharan Africa](#). This shift was driven by the pandemic-induced recession and oil prices falling to historic lows which exposed their vulnerability to disruptions in global supply chains and overdependence on food imports. Therefore, the [GCC](#) was facing a new geopolitical environment (Yousef, 2022).

**Graph 4:** *What, if the Gulf countries used Africa as a theatre of proxy war?*



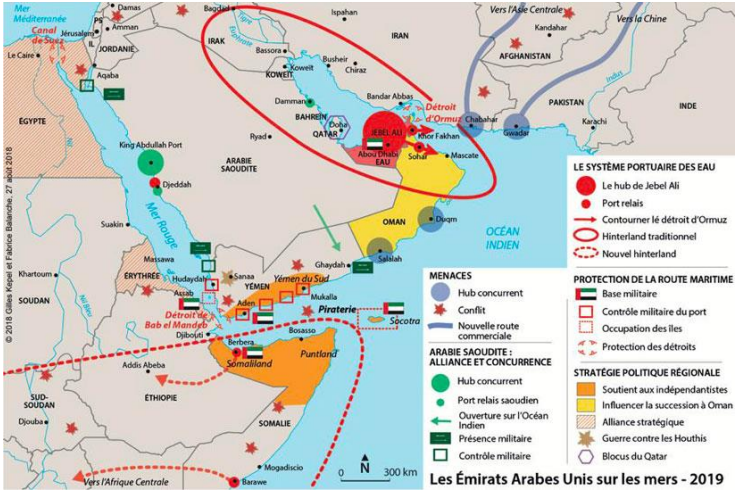
Source: © Saint Périer, 2018

Its interventions were linked to the broader competition between regional powers in the aftermath of the [Arab Spring](#) revolutions, which heightened perceptions of threats to regime security resulting from the rise of political Islam and the expansion of Iran's regional influence (Mourad, 2022).

As a result, economic diversification and food security have emerged as policy priorities for the GCC. Increased cooperation with SSA in agriculture and agribusiness, for example, would address food security concerns in the Gulf while increasing agricultural productivity and building [value chains](#) in Africa along the lines of product development, packaging and light manufacturing. Gulf countries have also sought to expand their investment in African transport and logistics infrastructure to support trade flows between the two regions, while integrating Africa more deeply into global supply chains through Gulf hubs, like the UAE hub market for petroleum products and the large regional refining centres (Yousef, 2022).

Since June 2017, however, the [GCC](#) has been divided by a conflict between [Qatar](#) and the Arab Quartet. [Saudi Arabia](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#), [Bahrain](#) and [Egypt](#) boycotted Qatar. The main reason for the rift was that the Arab Quartet countries objected to Qatar's support for political Islamist movements across the Middle East. But Qatar's crisis with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf neighbours had decades-long roots. There was a long-standing competition for leadership between Qatar and the UAE as the region's biggest financial hub. The anti-Qatar bloc also considered Qatar as too friendly to Iran for several years, too provocative in its backing of the Al Jazeera media network and too supportive of [the Muslim Brotherhood](#) (Bouoiyour & Selmi (2020). Qatar was urged to close its influential state-funded media network [Al Jazeera](#). This created a deep and lasting rift with repercussions across the [Middle East](#) and the [Horn of Africa](#) (Kinninmont, 2019). A fierce competition for allies ensued among the various factions involved in SSA, particularly in the [Horn of Africa](#), on a fault line between two distinctly different strategies and philosophies for peace and security (De Waal, 2019). Previously, the multilateral norms, principles and institutions developed in Africa over the past 25 years were applied. In recent years, the transactional politics of money and force of the [Gulf monarchies](#) have taken over. [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#) employed African troops and bases in their military operations against the Islamist [Houthi movement](#) in [Yemen](#). The UAE has used its financial power to promote political alliances, including the [Eritrea-Ethiopia peace agreement](#). In addition, the Saudi-UAE coalition and the Turkey-Qatar alliance are rivals for the allegiance of political authorities in [Somalia](#) (De Waal, 2019).

**Graph 5: The Horn of Africa is at the heart of rivalries between the Gulf countries**



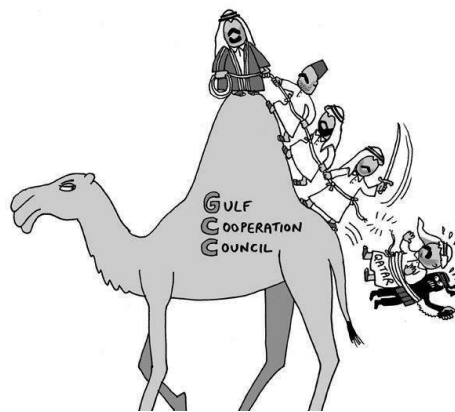
Source: © Saleh, 2019

Apparently, the Gulf states used sub-Saharan Africa as a proxy battleground to settle their scores. It became the prey of a new military-financial imperialism from the Gulf. The 'hawkish' duo of [Mohammed Bin Zayed](#) (in short, 'MbZ'), Crown Prince of [Abu Dhabi](#), and that of Saudi Arabia, [Mohammed Bin Salman](#) ('MbS'), established themselves as a powerful military power, a 'Little [Sparta](#)', as the American Secretary of Defence [Jim Mattis](#) ironically called it (Saint Périer, 2018). For example, it has acquired the [ports of Berbera](#) in [Somalia](#) and [Assab](#) in [Eritrea](#), which it uses for its [offensives in Yemen](#). A series of investments across the continent is creating a maritime and commercial empire. The giant [Dubai Port World](#) (DPW) has acquired terminals in [Mozambique](#), [Senegal](#) and [Algeria](#).

There are signs that 'Little Sparta' even dreams of becoming the new [Athens](#). In March 2018, DPW signed a contract with the [DR Congo](#) to build a deep-water port on the Atlantic coast, a \$1.2 billion project. The port at [Banana](#), a sandy spit of land at the mouth of [the Congo River](#), bordering the Congo Mangrove Marine Park, will handle 322,000 containers a year when completed in 2025 (Reuters, 2022). Congo's hitherto existing main port at [Matadi](#), which lies some 120 km (75 miles) upstream from Banana, is not deep enough to handle the larger vessels from Asia and Europe, requiring cargo to be transferred to smaller ships at neighbouring Congo Republic's [Pointe Noire](#) port (Reuters, 2022). On the other hand, African governments have been drawn into a conflict that has nothing to do with them; indeed, it is the only continent where states, at the behest of Gulf capitals, have openly taken sides in this confrontation (Saint Périer, 2018).

While [Djibouti](#) and [Eritrea](#) supported the blockading countries, [Sudan](#) and [Somalia](#) remained neutral, while [Ethiopia](#) and [Kenya](#) expressed concern. This left the Horn, and in particular Somalia in a precarious situation (Dahir, 2022). Even if the trade embargo were to be lifted, the deep divisions and mistrust among the Gulf neighbours are now likely to become a permanent feature of wider regional politics.

#### **Cartoon 4: *The Gulf Cooperation Council, cutting ties with Qatar***



Source: © Stephff, [Korea Times](#), *Opinion*, 6 June 2017 <sup>3</sup>

Rather than seeing the GCC as their primary regional alliance, the Gulf countries are now pursuing new alignments (Kinninmont, 2019). The dispute between Qatar and its Gulf neighbours is likely to continue in the foreseeable future, with most external partners seeking to maintain relations with both sides. Paradoxically, the two most politically sustainable

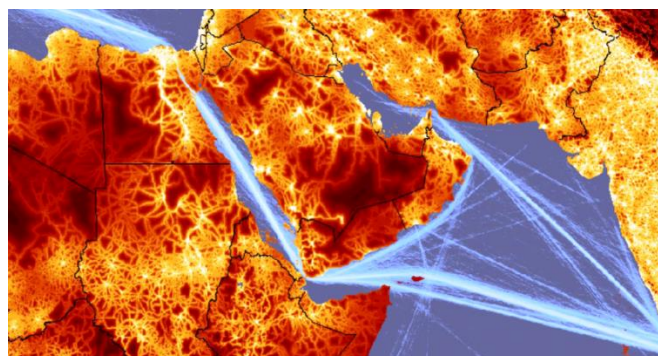
<sup>3</sup> 'Stephff', whose real name is Stéphane Peray, is a French cartoonist and artist based in Bangkok, born in Paris in 1964 and living in Asia since 1989. He is an active member of '[Cartooning For Peace](#)', the association created by the late [Kofi Annan](#) (see his [biography](#) on 'cartoon for the soul' prints, [artofstephff.com](#)).

countries in the region, [Qatar](#) and the [UAE](#), will actively seek to undermine each other, to the considerable detriment of the GCC's long-standing reputation for business-oriented political stability (Kinninmont, 2019). The diplomatic crisis has created a new Gulf with no winners; it has further divided the Arab and Muslim world and forced small states to make tough choices (Bouoiyour & Selmi, 2020). Last but not least, the arrival of [China](#), [Russia](#) and [Turkey](#) on the African scene has shaken the 'pax occidentalis' of the post-colonial system (Bertrand, 2021; Kohnert, 2022; Kohnert, 2023a).

[Egypt](#) under [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#) was the forerunner of modern Arab diplomacy in Black Africa. The death of Abdel Nasser in 1969 and the subsequent emergence of Libya's [Muammar Gaddafi](#) heralded what could be seen as a continuum of the same Nasserist Arab imperial tendency in Black Africa (Nwaezeigwe, 2021). From 1999, Gaddafi turned away from [pan-Arabism](#) and promoted instead [pan-Africanism](#), including rapprochement with Western nations. He played a leading role in the creation of the [African Union](#) and even became its chairman from 2009 to 2010 (Ramutsindela, 2009). For him, integration was the way to realise Africa's destiny. He promoted regional integration as a veritable mechanism for achieving political stability and an upward shift in sovereignty (Ajayi & Oshewolo, 2009).

Africa has seen an unprecedented level of [Middle Eastern](#) involvement in its regional affairs in recent years. Notably, [Egypt](#), [Iran](#), [Israel](#) and [Qatar](#) were involved, while [Saudi Arabia](#) (Kohnert, 2023b). [Turkey](#) and the [UAE](#), which seem intent on becoming key actors in the [Greater Horn](#), are building a series of military bases from [Sudan](#) to [Somalia](#), thus contributing to the ongoing militarization of the [Red Sea](#) (Heibach, 2020). Middle Eastern states have facilitated peace talks in, for instance, Sudan (Qatar, 2008–2011), and Somalia (Saudi Arabia, 2007; Turkey, since 2011), as well as between [Djibouti](#) and [Eritrea](#) (Qatar, 2010–2017). Not long ago, concerted mediation efforts by the UAE and Saudi Arabia led to an arrangement between [Eritrea](#) and [Ethiopia](#). This finally terminated their 20-year war in September 2018 and stimulated new negotiations between [Djibouti](#) and Eritrea. It also facilitated new talks on the tripartite dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the [Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam](#) and the sharing of the Nile's waters. However, the Horn of Africa has also been affected by the security repercussions of the recent Middle East disputes. The intra-Gulf crisis, which pits Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar and Turkey, has reverberated to the extent that the African Union discussed the spillover in January 2018 (Heibach, 2020).

**Graph 6:** *The Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea as the centre of global maritime traffic*



Source: © Uchida & Nelson, 2009 ; quoted in De Waal, 2019

However, relations between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have not been the only or the most important factor influencing Arab-African affairs. Apart from the reciprocal ignorance for most of the post-World War II period (Heibach, 2020), there exists a shared history of international relations between the two



regions. According to a thought-provoking thesis by the internationally renowned Kenyan-born American professor of African and Islamic studies, [Ali Mazrui](#), Arabia and Africa are inextricably linked by their shared history and cultural interaction, reflected in the mutual migration of people between the [Arabian Peninsula](#) and [Africa](#), linking languages, religions (especially [Islam](#)) and identities across both the [Sahara](#) and the [Red Sea](#) in a historical fusion of [Arabism](#) and [African identities](#) in the [New World Order](#) (Mazrui, 1992). According to him, the [spread of Islam](#) and the [Arabization](#) of [North Africa](#) were cultural countervailing forces that sought to outweigh the geological separatism of the Red Sea. After all, the majority of Arab people live now on the African continent. Most Arab countries are in Africa. There are more Muslims in [Nigeria](#) than in any other Arab country, including [Egypt](#). Moreover, both Arabs and Africans have suffered from the emergence of a system of '[global apartheid](#)', with the [white world](#) closing ranks (Mazrui, 1992).

The origins of the artificial and conceptual divide between the [Middle East](#) and Africa and the view of the Red Sea and the Sahara as racial and civilizational boundaries date back to [European Enlightenment](#) thought and early [colonial expansionism](#). Postcolonial [authoritarian regimes](#), [Cold War](#) rivalries, and [nationalist](#) currents in Africa, the Middle East, [Europe](#) and the [United States](#) reinforce these divides (Aïdi & Lynch & Mampilly, 2020). Although the Red Sea is in danger of losing its monopoly on the transit of goods between Europe and Asia, facing competition from alternative routes in the [Arctic](#) or [China's New Silk Roads](#), it remains of utmost importance. For the foreseeable future, it will retain its millennia-old role as an interface with the African continent as a major axis of trade between East and West (Lavergne, 2022). Where the lines of 'appropriate' boundaries are drawn between different cultural, political and economic phenomena has important political, social and cultural implications, defining not only the boundaries of citizenship and inclusion but also patterns of racial exclusion and domination (Aïdi & Lynch & Mampilly, 2020). Also, the rapid militarisation of the region through the establishment of several military bases in the [Horn of Africa](#) by the Gulf states increased the level of conflict in the region. The Gulf States considered the Horn of Africa as their second security belt (Zaghlami, 2019). Notably, [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#) saw the region as their 'western security flank'. They were united in their craving to prevent the growing influence of [Turkey](#), [Iran](#) and [Qatar](#) in this part of the world. They saw Qatar, which had opened the largest number of embassies in sub-Saharan Africa, as a facilitator for Iran to gain a foothold on the continent. Despite the recent easing of relations between Saudi Arabia and its partners with Qatar, geostrategic interests and key differences remained stable. African countries will continue to exploit these differences by attracting as much investment and humanitarian aid as possible (Cherkas, 2023).

However, the [regional security complexes](#) (RSCs) of the Middle East are not expanding into those of the [Horn of Africa](#). The two remain distinct and in the process of internal consolidation. Rather, the high polarity in the [Middle East](#), coupled with the often congruent interests in the [Horn of Africa](#) states, best explains the current pattern of their interaction, especially as Middle Eastern states pursue strategies that advance their own security interests at the expense of rival states within their own RSC (Cannon & Donelli, 2020). The shift of the western border of the Middle East [Regional Security Complex](#) (MERSC) towards the integration or subordination of the Horn of Africa Regional Security Complex (HOARSC) is due not only to geographical and cultural proximity but also to the large disparities in wealth and weaponry between the HOARSC and MERSC states, which allow for the formation of asymmetric alliances. However, rather than internalising and sharing the dynamics and interests of the MERSC rivalry, the HOARSC states have sought to capitalise on the MERSC rivalry. They can do so precisely because they are not part of the same RSC and therefore their costs of doing so are lower (Cannon & Donelli, 2020).

### 3. Case studies of GCC' relations with Africa

**Cartoon 5:** *How Saudi Arabia's ruthless prince is manipulating the world*

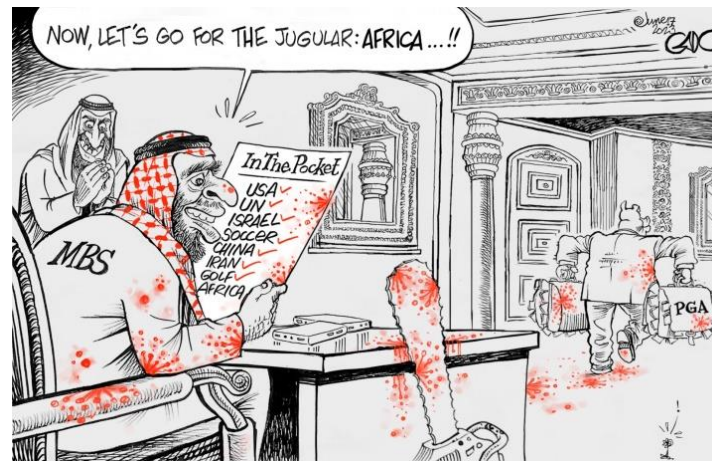


Source: © Hope, Bradley, *The Times*, 18 June.2023

What follows is a detailed analysis of the problems and potential of foreign relations of [sub-Saharan Africa](#) with the Arab Emirates of the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC), including [Saudi Arabia](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE), [Qatar](#) and [Oman](#), and their impact on the plight of African migrants in the [Arabian Peninsula](#).

#### 3.1 Saudi Arabia – SSA relations

**Cartoon 6:** *The growing influence of MBS and Saudi Arabia!*<sup>4</sup>



Source: © Gado, [Gado Cartoons](#), *Twitter* (X), 19.June 2023

[Wahhabi Islam](#) has been crucial to the building of the [Saudi state](#). It has been closely associated with the [Salafi movement](#) since the 1920s. This reached its peak when [Saudi Arabia](#) served as a refuge for [Egyptian](#) and [Syrian Muslim Brothers](#) in the 1950s and 1960s (Freitag, 2022). [Riyadh's](#) external activities in [sub-Saharan Africa](#), particularly in [Nigeria](#), which played a key role in the socio-economic, political and cultural development of the

<sup>4</sup> “Now, let's go for the jugular: Africa ...!!”, cartoon on [Mohammed bin Salman](#) (MBS), [Crown Prince](#) and [Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia](#), on Africa. © Gado, [Gado Cartoons](#), *twitter* (X), 19.June 2023.

continent, among others because it was one of the founders of the [ECOWAS](#) and the [O.A.U.](#), began in earnest when oil revenues began to flow in the 1950s and accelerated with the establishment of the [OPEC](#) in 1960. They coincided with a period of heightened [anti-colonial nationalism](#) in [West Africa](#) when Islamisation was considered as an alternative path of self-determined [modernization](#). Saudi Arabia was offered as one of several possible role models. The Saudi government and institutions focused on supporting [Islamic education](#) and [missionary activity](#), as well as providing aid to the poor, according to the Islamic obligation of [zakat](#) (alms-giving). Since 1979, the [Saudi-Iranian rivalry](#) has become a major factor in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards African Muslim countries to which was added in the past years competition with [Turkey](#) (Freitag, 2022).

**Cartoon 7: Saudi Arabian red carpet**  
 South African President [Ramaphosa](#) shaking hands with MBS



Source: © Bbrandan Reynolds, [Business Day](#), 16 October 2018

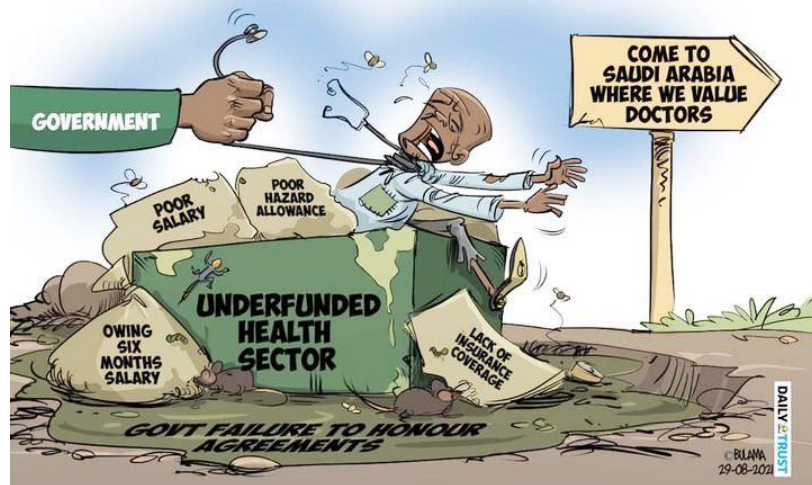
The Saudi diplomatic network in [SSA](#) was formerly established in predominantly Muslim states in the [Sahel](#), [West Africa](#), the [Horn of Africa](#) and [South Africa](#). It relies on experienced diplomats who have been present in Africa since the 1970s. It is mainly through official state channels that [Riyadh's](#) power is exercised in Africa, as private-sector economic initiatives are still very modest (Augé, 2020).

Diplomatic relations between [Nigeria](#) and its pre-colonial predecessors, notably [the Sokoto Caliphate](#), and [Arabia](#), stretched back many centuries. They were reinforced after Nigeria's independence when Islam and [Arabization](#) played a key role in the establishment of diplomatic relations between [Nigeria](#) and Saudi Arabia. Arab investment played a key role in consolidating the [emirate system](#) and the introduction of the [Sharia law in Northern Nigeria](#) in 1999. More recently, Nigerian [irregular immigrants](#) in Saudi Arabia, arrests, detentions and executions of Nigerians by the Saudi Arabian authorities have been the cause of diplomatic tensions between the two countries (Jabo & Ubandawaki, 2021). Moreover, the Saudi-Iranian conflict has contributed to a fuelling of violent clashes in Nigeria between the Saudi-backed [Izala movement](#) and the Iranian-backed Islamic Movement (Heibach, 2020).

Last but not least, a growing number of well-educated Nigerians, like medical doctors and teachers are seeking better working conditions outside their country, either in Britain or the United Arab Emirates. This is all the more the case as they are often poorly paid at home and have little to look forward to in terms of pensions after decades of service to their country in an underfunded health sector. So the appeal for more patriotism will fall on deaf ears.



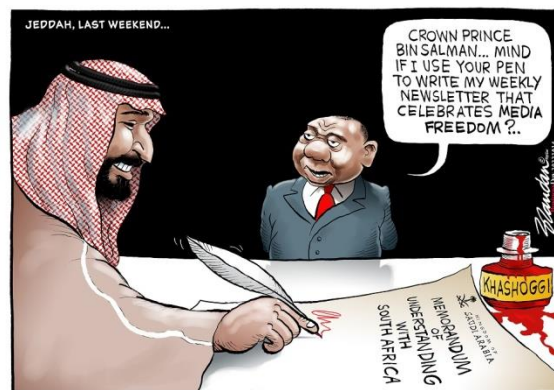
**Cartoon 8: Labour piracy of doctors from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia**



Source: © [Bulama's Cartoons](#), Facebook, 29 August 2021

Also, the [Horn of Africa](#), including [Djibouti](#), [Ethiopia](#), [Eritrea](#), [Somalilan](#), [Somaliland](#) and [Somalia](#), is at an economic and geopolitical crossroads, with growing importance in the complexities of the [Indo-Pacific](#), [African](#) and [Arabian Peninsula](#) regions. The strategic nature that these territories represent for a growing number of external actors as well as for the populations who live there pose a considerable challenge, notably for neighbouring Saudi Arabia (Dupont, 2023).

**Cartoon 9: Saudi Arabia's tempting ink**



Source: © Brandan Reynolds, [Business Live](#), *Business Day*, South Africa, 18 October 2022



### 3.2 United Arab Emirates - SSA relations

**Cartoon 10: UAE and Israel: Normalization or Formalization?** <sup>5</sup>



Source: © illustration by Erhan Yalvaç <sup>6</sup>, [Daily Sabah](#), [SETA](#), Ataman, 2020

The [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) has become a leading donor of [foreign aid](#). In the past, the country's aid was intransparent and little was known about the composition. This changed after 2009 when the UAE began providing detailed project-level data to the OECD's [Development Assistance Committee](#) (Cochrane, 2021). This revealed that, contrary to common assumptions, the aid portfolio was not biased by identity or faith, but rather flowed to the largest recipients according to ideological, political, economic and military objectives. Moreover, the three largest recipients, [Egypt](#), [Serbia](#) and [Yemen](#), received mostly general budget support in the form of both grants and concessional loans (Cochrane, 2021).

The UAE's preferred regional partners are authoritarian rulers who are critical of [political Islam](#) and opposed to the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). It also opposes [Iranian](#) expansion in the Middle East (Steinberg, 2020). However, the anti-Iranian dimension of Emirati foreign policy is much less pronounced than its anti-Islamist dimension. The [Abu Dhabi government](#) is convinced that the transnational structure of the [Islamist group](#) is dangerous and that if the Brotherhood came to power in countries such as [Egypt](#), it would try to mobilise its supporters in the [Gulf states](#), and especially in the UAE, against their governments. This is why the Emirati leadership supports authoritarian governments or military forces in [Egypt](#), [Libya](#) and, to a lesser extent, [Sudan](#) (Steinberg, 2020).

Since the restrictions imposed by the [structural adjustment policies](#) of the [IMF](#) and [World Bank](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) became the new [Promised Land](#) of African mafia elites (Camara, 2021). Contrary to the policies of major Western donors to [tie aid](#) and investment to [good governance](#) and [democratization](#), the Emirates did not bother about the political conditioning of development aid. Like [China](#), they quickly understood the opportunities to be gained from the difficulties of African states weakened by structural

<sup>5</sup> Abu Dhabi Crown Prince [Mohammed bin Zayed](#) (MbZ) with Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#). ‘On 13 August 2020, U.S. President [Donald Trump](#) declared that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and [Israel](#) have agreed to “fully normalize their diplomatic relations.” A joint statement by the U.S., the state of Israel and the UAE was released. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu shared Trump’s message and considered the statement a “historic” step’. (Ataman, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> “Erhan Yalvaç graduated from the Graphic Department of Istanbul State School of Applied Fine Arts in 1976-77. He worked in the graphics department of Aydınlık Newspaper until the 1980 coup and drew cartoons. He worked as a graphic designer and art director in advertising agencies until 1998. He painted and held exhibitions between 1998-2003. He still draws paintings, illustrations and cartoons.” ([BRIQ-journal](#), (*Belt & Road Initiative Quarterly*), accessed: 23 November 2023).

adjustment policies. The Emirates did not mind helping the corrupt and profiteering African elite to consolidate their investment networks in Africa (Camara, 2021).

Emirati investments in [SSA](#) have often been made under scandalous conditions, for example through large-scale [land grabbing](#) in [Sudan](#) and other land-surplus countries. Other investments have been in infrastructure, particularly ports ([DP World](#)), aviation ([Emirates](#) (airline), telecommunications, insurance, banking, agriculture and real estate. Investments were sometimes less visible because they were mostly made through [investment funds](#) or through companies of a third country, such as [Morocco](#), where they held a majority of the voting rights. They also participated, albeit mostly indirectly, in conflicts, for example in [Sudan](#), where the black population was dispossessed for the benefit of the Arab power elite. (Camara, 2021; Kohnert, 2023).

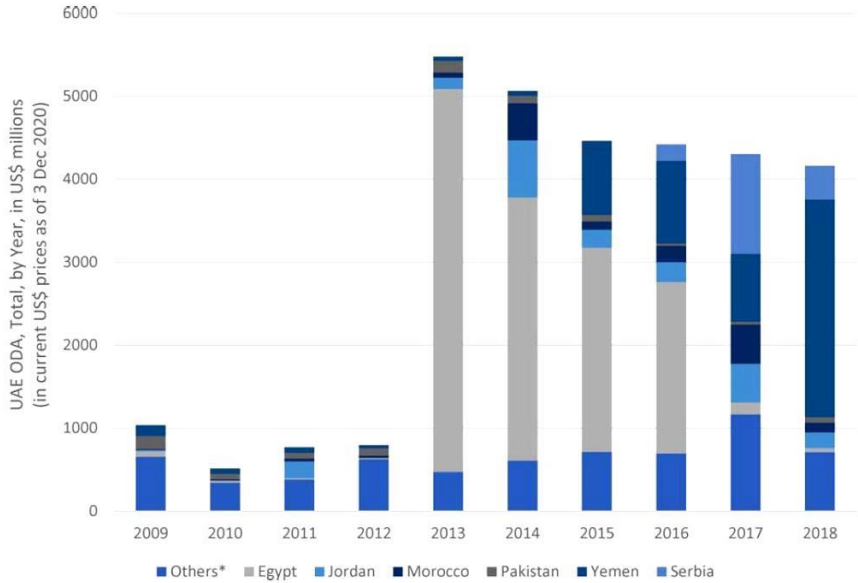
The monarchy's [nation-building](#) visions for the 21st century, camouflaged by supposedly '[moderate Islam](#)', focussed on national rebranding strategies and its geopolitical empowerment in the Gulf and the Middle East (Kourgiotis, 2020). Although 'moderate Islam' was designed to generate '[soft power](#)', it also served '[hard power](#)', as was evident in the containment of [political Islam](#). Religious tolerance was mainly used to whitewash domestic intolerance and aggressive interventionism in the internal affairs of other countries. The UAE's leadership has managed to rebrand itself as one of the world's most serious proponents of [interfaith dialogue](#) and to shift the agenda in its favour. Meanwhile, in the eyes of the US and some other Western partners, the monarchy is being presented as an 'enlightened model' for the rest of the region. According to the Dubai 2021 Plan, the [Abu Dhabi 2030 Vision](#) and many others, the ruling families aspire to pose as soft powers transforming the emirates into a global hub of market economy, green growth and tolerance (Kourgiotis, 2020). However, growing security concerns have also forced the Emirates to resort to 'hard power', such as funding anti-Brotherhood parties and militias, supporting coups and spreading [conspiracy theories](#) to discredit opponents. It could be compared to [US anti-communist activities](#) during the [Cold War](#) or the [Chinese](#) model, which promoted 'soft power' campaigns on environmental issues, climate change, etc. while suppressing dissidents and ethnic groups at home. As far as their Arab and Muslim audiences in SSA are concerned, the Emirati rulers are cautious enough to remind them that far from assimilating 'alien, Western values', they simply rediscover the [Islamic Golden Age](#) (9th–12th centuries) and revive the legacy of [Damascus](#), [Baghdad](#) and [al-Andalus](#) (Kourgiotis, 2020).

Until 2017, the [UAE's](#) relations with SSA focused mainly on aid and political support to international organisations in line with Arab interests. The [2017 blockade of Qatar](#) spearheaded by [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#), who cut off most of its existing land, sea, and air traffic routes, sometimes called the New [Arab Cold War](#), took place in a political landscape in which assumptions about power and interests were partially toppled by the [Trump administration](#). In this context of Trump's unilateral support for [Israel](#), mediation appeared to be a minor interest, a form of diplomatic practice that was seen as ineffective and therefore under-resourced and unsupported (Milton-Edwards, 2020).

However, the intra-Gulf crisis, which pitted Saudi Arabia and the UAE against [Qatar](#) and [Turkey](#), has impacted to the extent that even the [African Union](#) discussed possible spill-overs in January 2018 (Heibach, 2020). Africa emerged as the main region where the rivalry between Turkey and the UAE intensified. While Turkey allocated more [ODA](#) to Muslim countries in general, its main motivation was not based on religious-cultural affinity as in the case of the UAE, for example in [Somalia](#) (Mugurtay & Muftuler-Bac, 2023). In addition, the UAE engaged in proactive management of the regional scene. It supported, in close cooperation with Saudi Arabia, personalized by the close relationship between the two crown

princes [Mohamed bin Salman](#) (MBS) and [Mohamed bin Zayed](#) (MBZ), the [reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea](#) in 2018 (Lavergne, 2022). It also provided financial support for the ['democratic transition' in Sudan in 2019](#). Moreover, [Abu Dhabi](#) favoured the strengthening of partnerships with [China](#), following in the footsteps of [Dubai](#). Finally, it recognised [Israel](#), which has become a privileged partner within the framework of the ['Abraham Accords'](#) signed together with [Bahrain](#) in Washington in September 2020 (Lavergne, 2022).

**Graph 7: Total UAE ODA by year, in US\$ millions in current prices as of 3 December 2020**



Source: Cochrane, 2021

The [Abu Dhabi Fund for Development](#), established in 1971, for example, like the other traditionally conservative major Arab aid donors such as [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Kuwait](#), tended to distribute its [manna](#) to countries belonging to the Islamic civilisation and countries with voting patterns similar to Arab countries in the [UN General Assembly](#) (Neumayer, 2003). Poorer countries in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) were more likely to receive bilateral and multilateral aid. The same was true for countries without diplomatic relations with [Israel](#). In this respect, the distribution of Arab aid was quite different from that of Western donors (Neumayer, 2003).

Saudi Arabia and the [UAE](#) signed military cooperation agreements that significantly expand and diversify their military presence in [Eritrea](#), [Djibouti](#), [Somaliland](#) and [Somalia](#). Their primary motive was the [war in Yemen](#). In particular, [Abu Dhabi](#) wanted to take control of the Yemeni coastline, cut off rebel supply routes and intensify naval and air strikes against the [Huthi](#) and [Saleh forces](#) from a southern flank (Abdi, 2017). In 2020, Abu Dhabi also began to negotiate with [Kampala](#) regarding the deployment of Ugandan soldiers there (Heibach, 2020).

The modernisation of the [UAE Armed Forces](#) was based on several pillars to ensure its long-term sustainability. It was led by the conclusion of defence partnerships with Western powers, the increase in the purchase of advanced weaponry, the establishment of solid training, the introduction of [military service](#) and the introduction of civic education programmes aimed at youth and pre-adolescents to encourage them to join the army (Mourad, 2022)

Nevertheless, there are doubts as to whether the recent troop deployments by the [UAE](#) and [Turkey](#) are sustainable in terms of prospective, long-term and sustained extra-territorial

deployments. The actual and latent power capabilities of the two states and their overall security burden constrain and limit the options for using military instruments abroad in pursuit of foreign policy objectives. This has led both Turkey and the UAE to engage in various forms of long-distance warfare involving local partners, allied militias and mercenaries (Donelli & Cannon, 2023).

The current scramble for influence is driven by both geo-economic and geo-security imperatives, i.e. securing a post-oil future and repositioning for a potential future conflict with [Iran](#). The Gulf states, led by the UAE, have significantly increased investment in infrastructure, real estate, hospitality, transport and telecommunications in the Horn of Africa (Abdi, 2017). DP World, the UAE's multinational logistics company based in [Dubai](#), has won concessions to manage several ports in the hands of national and sub-national governments, including [Somaliland](#) ([Berbera naval base](#)), [Djibouti](#), [Bosaso](#) ([Puntland](#)), [Kismayo](#) ([Jubaland](#) Interim Authority) and most recently [Barawe](#) (Southern Somalia, South Western State). Thus, the [UAE](#) pursued a '[One Belt, One Road strategy](#)' in the [Horn of Africa](#), similar to [China's Belt and Road initiative](#). The [Abu Dhabi Fund for Development](#) also provided loans and grants to finance infrastructure projects in [Somalia](#) and [Kenya](#). Kenya now buys most of its oil from the UAE and exports coffee, tea and textiles in return (Abdi, 2017).

In March 2022, the United Arab Emirates overtook the [UN Security Council](#), for the first time since the 1980s, which allowed for setting the agenda on key topics of its interest, including its longstanding '[Three-Island Dispute](#)' in the [Strait of Hormuz](#) between the [Persian Gulf](#) and the [Gulf of Oman](#) with Iran and its more strategic approach to the [Horn of Africa](#) (Oxford Analytica, 2021).

**Cartoon 11:** *If I lose the presidentials, I will settle in Dubai as an influencer*<sup>7</sup>



Source: © Damien Glez, [Jeune Afrique](#), 16 January 2023

In July 2023, the United Arab Emirates ([UAE](#)) signed a \$1.9bn mining deal with the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#). This was a milestone in UAE-SSA partnerships. It will enable the establishment of more than four industrial mines linking the gold, tin and tantalum-rich provinces of [South Kivu](#) and [Maniema](#). Both provinces have suffered from decades of violence by armed groups, some of which support themselves through the illegal trade in minerals. According to a report published last month by the intergovernmental body International Organisation for Migration ([IOM](#)), a surge in attacks on civilians by non-state armed groups in eastern DRC has displaced around one million people since January 2023 (Cossins-Smith, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Cartoon on the double-minded stance of the president of the DR Congo, [Félix Tshisekedi](#); "[Kinshasa](#) (capital of the [DR Congo](#), D.K.) and [Abu Dhabi](#) signed a commercial partnership. The DRC and United Arab Emirates pledged to work together against gold smuggling". © [Damien Glez](#), [Jeune Afrique](#), 16 January 2023.



### 3.3 Qatar - SSA relations

Cartoon 12: Qatar World Cup & the fate of African migrants



Source: © Zapiro, [The Black Commentator](#), 3 December 2022, Issue 934

The exposed geographical location and the radical ‘[small-power](#)’ system give the United Arab Emirates ([UAE](#)) and [Qatar](#) an incentive to cooperate in managing the threat posed by being neighbours to two (aspiring) regional hegemons, [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Iran](#) (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020). The two small states have responded very differently to the causes and consequences of instability in the [Persian Gulf](#) and have developed very different foreign policies to deal with it. The UAE played a leading role in the diplomatic boycott and [economic embargo launched against Qatar](#) in June 2017, the [New Arab Cold War](#), including the de facto dissolution of the Gulf Cooperation Council ([GCC](#)). If the UAE’s bet is that a sophisticated port network combined with [Indian Ocean trade](#) will enable it to escape the constraints of smallness, Qatar’s strategy to achieve the same end has been to promote itself as radically different from its Gulf neighbours. It is explicitly challenging much larger regional players, notably Saudi Arabia. This foreign policy divergence is not just the result of tactical juggling to counter the impact of the [Arab Spring](#). More fundamentally, it stems from the different roles that [Abu Dhabi](#) and [Doha](#) play, not only in their home region but beyond. In short, the [Al Jazeera](#) networking effect versus the [DP World](#) vision (Miller & Verhoeven, 2020).

Graph 8: Qatar Map



Source: © 1997 Magellan Geographix, [infp lease](#)

[Qatar](#) gained its current international reputation as a ‘trusted partner’ through mediation, that started in the [Yemen conflict](#), passed by [Lebanon](#), [Sudan](#), [Djibouti](#), [Palestine](#), [Taliban and Afghani](#) government mediation (Alqashouti, 2021), and most recently in the ongoing [Israel-Hamas war](#) (Sullivan, 2023). It has systematically used its political connections, its huge financial resources, its reliability and impartiality, always trying to comply with [UN principles](#) and [international law](#). However, this has created negative competition from some neighbours who are ready to destroy any achievement, no matter what is lost, just to undermine the efforts made. Sometimes it's just resistance to change and fear of the future, especially among competing elites with a long history of conflict (Alqashouti, 2021).

However, the containment of Qatar by its neighbours had a serious negative impact on its food supply. With no domestic agriculture to speak of, Qatar's external logistics networks were essential to maintaining its daily needs. Food was used as a ‘weapon’ (Koch, 2021). Finally, new food supply chains were established, largely with the help of partners in [Iran](#) and [Turkey](#). This demonstrated that the [geopolitics](#) of food is not simply played out over some abstract geographical territory in response to prevailing geopolitics, but that geopolitics is actively constituted through food and its supply, both in the Gulf and globally (Koch, 2021). Last, but not least, Qatar, was also seeking foreign agricultural investments in [SSA](#). It negotiated with [Kenya](#) in 2009 to obtain 40,000 hectares of land in the fertile [Tana Delta](#), though negative domestic publicity (land issues are extremely sensitive in Kenya) has put the talks on hold. But the [Qatari Investment Fund](#) recently signed a contract worth \$1 billion to support plans by a Doha-based food conglomerate, [Hassad Foods](#), to develop 20,000 hectares in [northern Sudan](#) (Abdi, 2017).

**Cartoon 12:** *Land grabbing in SSA*

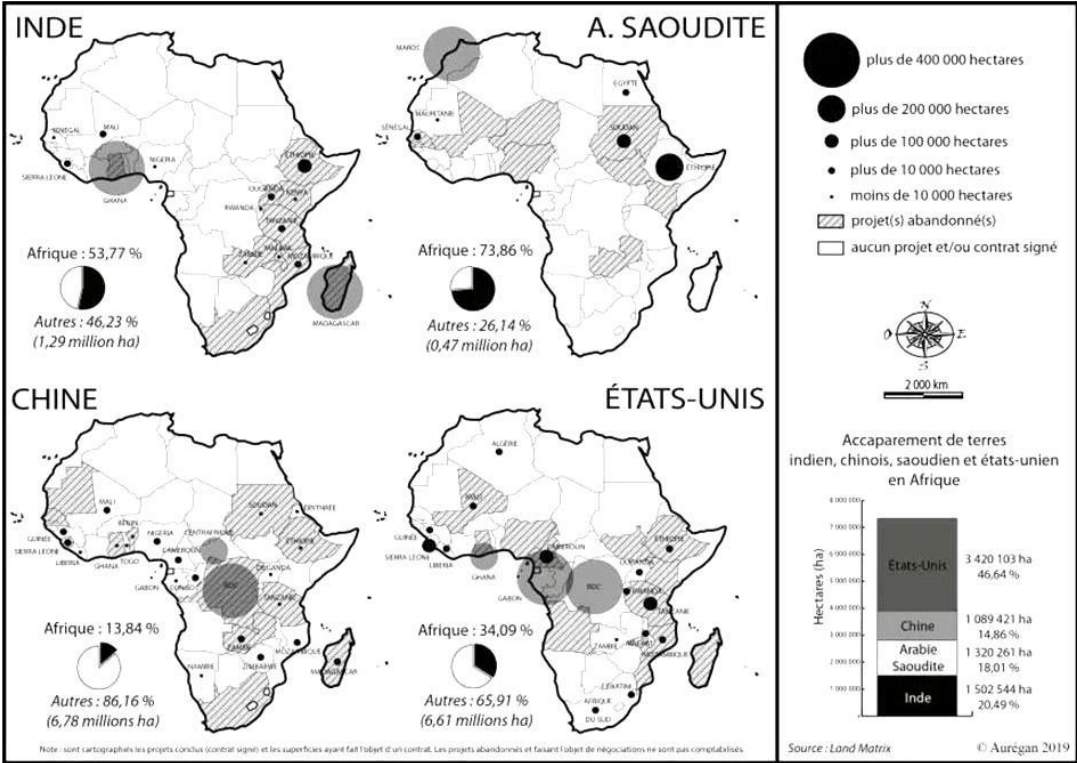


Source: © expo-copertina, Resilience.org

[Qatar](#), Saudi Arabia and the [UAE](#) were leading [land-grabbing](#) in SSA, signing bilateral 'investment' treaties and engaging in agro-land deals. [Ghana](#) and [Sudan](#), for example, responded with the creation of 'investment' agencies to further their 'investment' efforts in Africa. However, these land grabs have had serious implications for African economic and environmental sovereignty and have caused profound inequalities and fragmentation (Mapuranga & Majoni, 2022). Often these lands have been taken without complying with national land tenure laws. This partly limits the ability of African countries to effectively control and monitor the activities of foreign land grabbers or investors on leased land. This loophole in the governance of SSA's arable land has led many foreign partners to use arable land for their own benefit at the expense of Africa's food sovereignty initiative. It has also

contributed to the perception of Africa as a resource-cursed region, unable to feed its population despite its global partnerships and vast land resources (Agunyai & Amusan (2023). The redefinition of partnership contracts and the involvement of local communities in the management of these companies at the local level are all strategies for making the presence of these multinationals profitable in African rural areas (Iliassou & Geralde, 2023).

**Graph 9: Land-grabbing by selected countries in Africa**



Source: © Aurégan 2019, Iliassou & Geralde, 2023

**3.4 Oman-SSA relations**

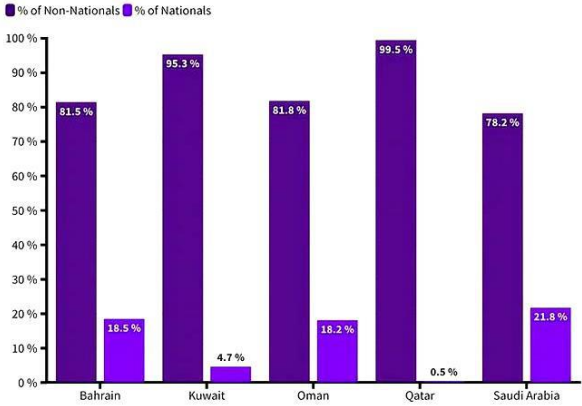
**Cartoon 13: migrants in Oman, trapped by abusive employers**



Source: © HRW, 2016

Many families in [Oman](#), like other [Gulf states](#), rely on [migrant domestic workers](#) to care for their children, cook their meals, and clean their homes. African migrant labourers are mostly recruited from [Ethiopia](#), [Tanzania](#) (HRW, 2016) and [Nigeria](#) (Obadofin, 2022).

**Graph 10: Percentage of nationals and non-nationals employed in the private sector in Gulf countries (2020)**



Source: [Gulf Labour Markets and Migration](#)  
Source: Obadofin, 2022

However, there has been an increase in the recruitment of domestic workers from [East African](#) countries to the Gulf States, including [Oman](#). More recently, African migrants included [Ghana](#), [Lesotho](#), [Liberia](#), [Nigeria](#), [Sierra Leone](#), [South Africa](#), [Zambia](#), and [Zimbabwe](#) (U.S. Dept, 2022).

Recruitment agencies seek to circumvent the restrictions and bans imposed by some Asian countries in recent years on the migration of domestic workers to the Gulf. Migrants are predominantly female. There are at least 130,000 migrant domestic workers in the country, but probably many more in the [informal sector](#). Recruiters are promising them a decent wage and good working conditions (HRW, 2016). For some workers, these promises are being fulfilled. But for others, the reality is grim. Once they arrive, many find themselves trapped with abusive employers, forced to work in exploitative conditions, their plight hidden behind closed doors. Oman also sometimes bans domestic workers from some countries. In 2016, for example, authorities banned workers from [Ethiopia](#), [Kenya](#), [Senegal](#), [Guinea](#) and [Cameroon](#) on dubious grounds, such as preventing the spread of diseases from these African countries to [Oman](#), and because workers from these countries were allegedly involved in certain crimes (HRW, 2016).

**Graph 11: Top countries of origin for female migrants in Oman**  
*The vast majority of female migrants are domestic workers*

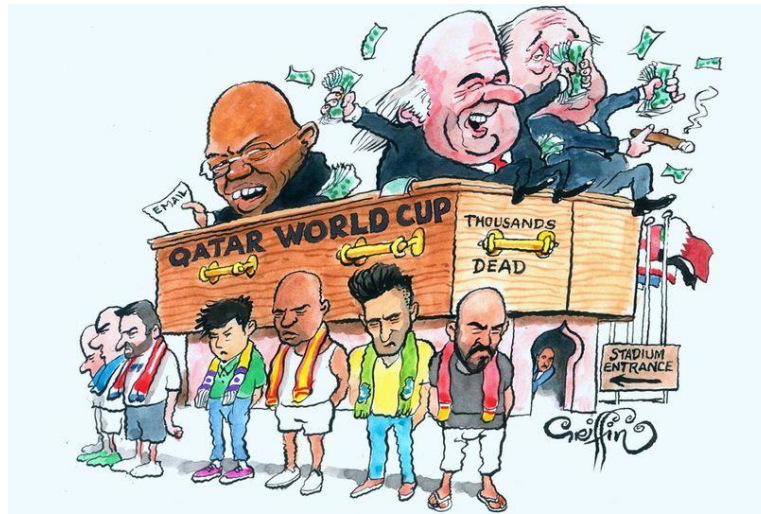


Source: © HRW, 2016



## 4. The plight of African migrants in the Arab peninsula

**Cartoon 14:** *Sponsorship and the looming crisis for FIFA the plight of slaves who die on Qatar's World Cup buildings*



Source: © [Griffin, Charles](#), Routledge, 2015

The most visible changes in the socio-cultural conditions of the Emirati system can be seen in [Saudi Arabia](#), which has been ruled by a strict brand of Islam for decades. The social revolution is also making the kingdom more attractive to foreigners. The [UAE](#) has been rushing through its own social changes. In the past three years, it has overhauled family laws that were long governed by [Sharia](#) (Islamic law) (Editor(2023)).

The Gulf's [social contract](#) meant zero taxes for citizens and expatriates. That is no longer the case. Since 2018, four of the six GCC members have introduced a [value-added tax](#). The UAE will introduce a 9% corporate tax in June 2023. [Income tax](#) is still a taboo subject, but few expect it to remain so. Life is getting more expensive in other ways too. The [UAE](#) abolished [fuel subsidies](#) in 2015. Petrol is still cheap by global standards, but it is 30% more expensive than in Saudi Arabia and almost 150% more expensive than in Kuwait. Most Gulf countries have raised electricity and water prices, which were once well below market rates (Editor(2023)). [Oman](#), which had not changed its electricity tariff for 33 years, abolished a reduced rate for its citizens. They now pay the same as expatriates. Higher taxes and lower subsidies have made life harder. [Expatriates](#) are also feeling the pinch, but they are still flocking to the Gulf (Editor(2023)).

[Youth unemployment](#) has become a serious problem. The UAE does not release reliable figures on [unemployment](#). However, unofficial estimates suggest that around 11 % of young people are unemployed. In [Saudi Arabia](#), 17 % of citizens aged between 15 and 24 cannot find a job. In [Bahrain](#), youth unemployment has almost doubled over the past decade and is expected to reach 10% by 2021. Like the other Gulf states, the [UAE](#) is trying to force companies to hire more nationals. Every company must have Emiratis in 2 % of its local positions. The figure will rise every year until it reaches 10 % by the end of 2026. On social media, Emiratis complain that foreigners are taking all the good jobs. [Expatriates in the United Arab Emirates](#) who represent about 90% of the population accuse locals of being spoiled and lazy. Such arguments would have been rare in past decades because the two groups had little reason to interact. Today, they are being forced to compete, and some locals are finding they are unprepared (Editor (2023)).

To get young unemployed people off the streets, the [UAE](#) introduced [compulsory military service](#) for men in 2014. Conscripts with a secondary school diploma serve for 11 months, while those without spend three years in the army. Compulsory service has another aim, it fosters a sense of [nationalism](#). So does the war in Yemen. Nationalism bolsters support for rulers at a time of rapid change. Emirati officials have long wondered how to reduce the demographic imbalance while sustaining a \$500bn economy which relies on foreign labour (Editor (2023)). [Saudi Arabia](#) has no minimum wage, but it requires private firms to pay citizens at least 4,000 [rials](#) (\$1,066) a month to count them toward their Saudization quota. Higher fees for [work permits](#) are narrowing the wage gap, but migrants are still cheaper (over 80% earn less than 4,000 rials). Also, the government cannot increase quotas for Saudis or their salaries without crushing the [private sector](#) (Editor(2023)).

Foreign [migrant labour](#) has been indispensable to the development of the Emirates' infrastructure. Labour immigration in this region of the world is unparalleled in its scale and growth (Khatib, 2013). It constitutes a 'fix' for Gulf capitalism in many ways. First of all, the regulation of migration through the [kafala system](#) makes migrant workers heavily dependent on their employers. It strongly reflects the needs of employers and the overall economic development in general. This is also reflected in the fact that migrant workers can be easily brought in and expelled from the country (Yalçın, 2015). Second, it prevents migrants from forming political links with local allies. In doing so, it has essentially undermined class-based politics and accentuated the difference between citizens and non-citizens along racial and cultural lines. Yet, increased protests and spontaneous strikes by migrant workers since the mid-2000s are an example of migrant workers' ability to take action and make their demands public (Yalçın, 2015).

The GCC states recently engaged in international and domestic policies to manage the migrant population better. Considering the dependency of [Gulf states](#) on migrant labour and the constant increase in migration to these states (Aarthi & Sahu, 2021). The past few years have been a time of rapid change in the [GCC](#). After decades of empty talk, reforms in [Gulf states](#) are real, but risky, as the push to be more diverse and competitive risks are alienating citizens (Editor(2023)). However, a look at the [realpolitik](#) of mass immigration conducted by the Gulf states showed that they used retaliatory and coercive migration diplomacies as well as migrant right-washing on the international scene to shape immigration flows (Thiollet, 2019). States and non-state actors, including businessmen, migrant networks and brokers, have engaged in policies and practices of control. Contingent state policies and reforms in recent decades explain migration governance processes better than oil prices and market dynamics, the nature of political regimes, or the [rentier structures](#) of Gulf politics. In short, migration policies have become more discriminatory across categories of migrants in the GCC (Thiollet, 2019).

The Emiratis want to be global players in diplomacy and business. However, the GCC is not a monolith. [Saudi Arabia](#) and the United Arab Emirates ([UAE](#)) have moved the fastest. Together they account for more than 75% of the GCC's population and 70% of its \$2 trillion GDP. The rulers of both countries believe this is their moment to make fundamental changes to diversify their economies and prepare for the post-oil era (Editor(2023)). But diversification means pushing citizens into a [private sector](#) for which some are ill-prepared. It also means cuts in [social services](#), blowing holes in the paternalistic [social contract](#). To compensate, those in power are promoting new forms of [nationalism](#), even as they pursue plans to import masses of foreigners into a region where around half the population is already migrant.

**Graph 12: International migrants in the Arab Emirates, 2020**



The Economist

Source: Editor (2023), *The Economist*

As for the international scandal surrounding [Qatar's](#) nomination in 2010 to host the [2022 FIFA World Cup](#), the real scandal was not the corrupt football 'executives' or the belated resignation of [Sepp Blatter](#). Rather, it was the appalling death toll among migrant workers building the stadiums and infrastructure, with nearly 2,000 workers believed to have been killed, according to the [International Trade Union Confederation](#) in 2015 (Routledge, 2015). In 2021, it was revealed that at least 6,500 migrant workers had died in [Qatar](#) since the World Cup was awarded. The total number of deaths was significantly higher as these figures did not include deaths from several countries that send large numbers of workers to Qatar, including the [Philippines](#) and [Kenya](#) (Pattison & McIntyre et al., 2021). The increase in bilateral trade ties between Kenya and [Saudi Arabia](#) and the promise of employment lured many victims to traps of human traffickers (Munania& Odhiambo & Kimokoti, 2022).

**Graph 13: Qatar: Salary abuses among migrant workforce**



Source: © Holmes, 2020

According to a Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#)) report published in 2020, [Qatar's](#) labour reforms regarding the payment of wages to migrant workers have largely proven unsuccessful. Wage abuses among migrant workers persist. Workers are trapped in situations of abusive working conditions and fear reprisals for speaking out (Holmes, 2020). There is also a general lack of awareness of their legal rights under existing labour laws in the Gulf (Ewers & Diop & Le, et al.(2020).

The [sub-Saharan Africa-Arab States](#) labour migration corridor has witnessed huge traffic from African migrant-sending countries due to restrictions on the [Africa-Europe migration](#) corridor. The situation of labour migration in the Arab countries of the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) has attracted the attention of African governments, for example, to promote the inflow of [remittances](#) for economic development. However, some of the major migrant-sending countries, such as [Nigeria](#), did not have such protective measures in place. There was a need for an inter-regional platform for cooperation between the [African Union](#) and the GCC for partnerships to protect migrant workers from SSA (Akpomera, 2022). Domestic populations and the international community have been lulled into a form of [false consciousness](#) by the GCC's rebranding efforts, which characterise foreign labour as the ideal expression of the dominant material relations for the development of the country, thereby excluding the plight of migrant workers and framing the role of migrant labour as merely incidental to modern, progressive economic restructuring (Sharp, 2021).

Foreign migrant workers were often effectively held hostage through the nation's debt laws that arguably violate international law (Patrick, 2023). Thus, two [South African](#) men were being held in the [United Arab Emirates](#) after they were duped into signing debt acknowledgements. After serving a sentence, the men were forced to live on the veranda of the South African embassy, unable to leave the country until this 'debt' was repaid. The [Centre for Human Rights](#) at the [University of Pretoria](#) said it had no choice but to complain to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ([UNWGAD](#)) against the UAE (Patrick, 2023).

**Cartoon 14:** *South Africans forced to live on the veranda of the SA embassy in UAE for six years of accreditation*<sup>8</sup>



Source: © Patrick, 2023, [news 24](#), *Change.Org*, 10 May 2023

[Remittances](#) from African migrant workers in the [Arab Gulf countries](#) also played a crucial role in supporting families back home. Overall, remittance flows to [sub-Saharan Africa](#) from worldwide sources grew by 6.1 % to \$53 billion in 2022. This trend was largely driven by strong remittance growth in [Ghana](#) (12 %), [Kenya](#) (8.5 %), [Tanzania](#) (25 %), [Rwanda](#) (21 %) and [Uganda](#) (17 %). Remittances to [Nigeria](#), which accounted for about 38% of total remittance inflows to the region, grew by 3.3% to \$20.1 billion (World Bank, 2023). As for remittances from [Arab states of the Persian Gulf](#), the decline in oil prices and its impact on growth since 2018 has affected remittance outflows from Gulf Cooperation Council ([GCC](#)) countries (De & Quayyum & Schuettler & Yousefi (2019)). First, because non-oil [GDP](#) is a key determinant of remittance outflows, and oil GDP is a significant driver of non-oil GDP in

<sup>8</sup> Image accompanying a petition to free Sello Tsolo from the United Arab Emirates (Patrick, 2023).



the GCC only in the long run. Second, historically oil prices and remittances tend to move broadly in the same direction, but remittances are much less volatile than oil prices. Construction and government services are two non-oil GDP components that are strongly associated with remittance outflows (De & Quayyum & Schuettler & Yousefi (2019).

In addition, the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) in the GCC forced governments to take drastic measures, ranging from restrictions on economic activity to lockdowns, to control the spread of the virus. The economic pressures facing the GCC region in turn hurt its labour migrants. As the vast majority of these migrants come from poor developing countries in [South Asia](#), [Africa](#), [East Asia](#) and the [Middle East](#) that depend on remittances from the GCC, these countries were severely affected by the financial pitfalls of the GCC (Ekanayake, 2020).

There is a perceived unjustified earnings gap between [foreign migrants](#) in the GCC countries and [Arabs](#) and [Western](#) professionals, which may affect the productivity of migrants or encourage them to leave. This would be all the more important given the unprecedented importance of recruiting and retaining skilled migrant labour, especially as the local Arab workforce either lacks the required skills or prefers public to private employment (Alfarhan & Al-Busaidi (2019). However, between one-third and three-quarters of the real hourly earnings gap is due to differences in productivity-related characteristics, with the remainder due to the incorporation of higher opportunity costs for Westerners into the bargaining process. The widespread view that these earnings differentials are due to the potential effect of perceptions of the general superiority of Westerners was not confirmed by case studies during the period 2012-2014. The higher relative earnings of Westerners can be attributed to higher levels of education and actual labour market experience. In addition, a higher proportion of Westerners work for larger employers and in managerial positions, which pay higher wages, compared to the other migrant groups. Finally, compared to Arabs and Asians, Westerners face a higher opportunity cost of migration to the GCC countries, which puts them in a relatively better bargaining position for higher wages (Alfarhan & Al-Busaidi (2019). However, in the UAE there was a significant negative impact of the [Kafala system](#) on low-skilled and unskilled migrants, whereas no significant negative impact of the Emiratization policy was observed (Radi, 2019).

[Labour migrants](#) in the [Arab emirates](#) often live in overcrowded, substandard accommodation, sharing rooms and even '[bed space](#)', also called 'coffin home'. This is shared accommodation, where a room or apartment is furnished with several (bunk) beds, as in a hostel, and residents rent the beds they occupy (Ngeh, 2021). The average number of people in a [bed-share apartment](#) ranges from four to twenty, and the size of the apartments also varies, with some measuring 1 x 2 metres and others around 4 x 5 metres. In some hostels, there are more people than there are beds, which meant that people had to sleep on the floor, sleep in shifts or share beds. Going home was apparently not an option. They stayed because of pressure to meet their financial obligations, e.g. to repay loans that were taken to pay the cost of migration and to send money to family and close friends who expect support from them because they believe that there is money in [Dubai](#) and other emirates. Besides the pressure to stay and send remittances, the migrants in bed-space faced social pressure to be 'successful'. This was often associated with [upward mobility](#) in the labour market and/or [conspicuous consumption](#). In conclusion, extreme inequality in Dubai has produced a divided city, i.e., New Dubai where the city's wealthy residents reside and Old Dubai (including [labour camps](#)), which is reserved for those at the bottom of the economic ladder (Ngeh, 2021). However, case studies revealed that at least West African migrants have coped with the difficulties of this type of housing. They undermined and modified established practices of exclusion that relegated them to urban slums through strategic responses to the challenges of their daily lives. Their experiences and responses varied according to gender (Ngeh, 2022).

Although both Arab and African migrant women are systematically discriminated against compared to men, the latter tend to suffer the most negative consequences.

[Arab women](#) in [Oman](#), for example, experience disparities between the sexes in a number of spheres, including but not limited to the ability to own property, one's own personal safety, participation in political life, access to education, healthcare, the workforce, and prospective earnings. More recently, young Omani women have gained, in addition to their traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers, the skills necessary to establish online businesses via the use of [social media](#). However, in the process of operating their company, they run into several challenges, the most significant of which is restricted access to their target market. Additionally, they have commitments to their family, which interfere with their capacity to use the Internet. Also, despite their willingness to use social media, they are deficient in a variety of areas of expertise, including social media marketing. Even though more and more Omani women are venturing out on their own to launch their own businesses, there are still significant geographical disparities in terms of access to financing, training possibilities, and educational chances (Vishwanath, 2022).

**Cartoon 15:** *abuse of migrant domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates*



Source: © Lopez, 2014

However, female [foreign domestic workers](#) have to bear the brunt. The [United Arab Emirates](#), for example, attracts both male and female migrants. Since the mid-1980s, female migrants have increasingly dominated the influx of workers, particularly in the domestic and personal services sectors, in roles previously held by men in UAE society (Sabban, 2002). The very sustainability of the UAE household, as cited by UAE employers, is directly linked to the continued importation of domestic workers. Foreign domestic workers in the UAE are everywhere, in all homes, in all towns and cities, large and small, and even in desert areas, helping Bedouins milk their goats and make yoghurt and cheese. Foreign domestic workers are employed in huge mansions as well as in poor charity homes. They are easy to acquire, change and exchange. They come from different nationalities, colours, religions, levels of education, skills, etc. The number of foreign domestic workers alone is higher or at least equal to that of the local population. Expatriate domestic workers in the Emirates have their own problems, which they have brought with them in the migration process. However, these problems are exacerbated and mishandled at all levels within their host country (Sabban, 2002).

**Cartoon 16:** *'young brides' from Egypt bought by much older foreign Arab emirs*



Source: © Doa El Adl, Dieudonne & Scherbel-Ball, 2016

African migrant labourers are mainly from [Ethiopia](#), but increasingly also from [Eritrea](#), [Senegal](#), [Somalia](#) and [Sudan](#). [Migrant domestic workers](#) are isolated physically, psychologically, socially, culturally and in all aspects of human existence. However, the degree of isolation varies. Some foreign domestic workers live in an abusive environment of isolation. Others can interact socially and break through some of the physical and psychological barriers they face. Domestic workers in the Emirates are often in a situation of [slavery](#) under the individual sponsorship of the employer. The employer decides their fate and controls their lives. The only difference is that they are not bought and sold. The increasing dominance of domestic workers is part of an unspoken 'bargain' between the Emirati state and the emerging [civil society](#), whereby the state provides a leisurely life in exchange for absolute political control (Sabban, 2002). This has created a negative international image of exploiting and abusing poor women from other regions of the world. The issue of mistreatment of foreign domestic workers receives considerable media attention and is a serious concern for NGOs and human rights organisations outside the Emirates (Sabban, 2002).

## 5. Conclusion

**Cartoon 17:** *Trump, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Terrorism*



Source: © [Gado cartoons](#), 2023

Mazrui's vision of a united 'Afrabia' was therefore from the start too idealistic, one-sided and far from reality. The relationship between Arabs and black Africans since the seventh century AD has always been largely asymmetrical, with the [Middle East](#) usually the giver and [black Africa](#) the receiver (Fay, 2022). Already since the seventh and eighth centuries AD, the [Islamic empire](#) supplanted the old order and built up the [trans-Saharan slave trade](#). As Islam expanded through wars and conquests, captives who refused to accept Islam were enslaved. As the growing need for labour in the courts of the rulers of [North Africa](#) and the Middle East for economic, military and prestige purposes continued to outstrip the supply from conquest, slaves were sought from far and wide. [Slave labour](#) was mainly used in the service sector, e.g. as cooks, wet nurses for masters' children, and waiters on ladies of the house as well as concubines, but also for military and security services (Kehinde, 2023). Black troops made up of slaves were first introduced into [Egypt](#) between 868 and 884 AD. Black slaves were traded by Arabs, for example from [Sudan](#), from the 7th to the 19th century (Hasan, 1977). Black soldiers were often used to counteract rebellious tendencies among local soldiers by the creation of a corps of alien soldiers (Kehinde, 2023). The enslavement of black Africans was justified by the religiously cloaked ideology that it was legitimate to enslave black people because they were considered no better than animals. During this period, [Black Africa](#) became the largest depot of slaves for the Islamic world. Much of the degrading attitude towards black people continues to this day. It is mainly based on the Arab-centric social hierarchy that projects contempt towards African cultures (Kehinde, 2023). As Arab powers, especially after the [Arab Spring](#), increasingly compete for influence and voting power in international organisations such as the [UN](#), they should overcome long-held views and attitudes towards Africa and its peoples, and give way to relationships based on equality, understanding and mutual respect (Mbiavanga & Ylönen, 2022). While state and related actors have recently been largely responsible for the expansion of Middle Eastern powers' influence, notably in the Horn of Africa and [East Africa](#), [non-state actors](#), such as large [African migrant](#) and [diaspora](#) communities in the [Middle East](#), have expanded Africa's presence, but have also sometimes served to perpetuate long-standing prejudices and derogative attitudes towards Africa and its peoples (Mbiavanga & Ylönen, 2022).



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**Résumé :** *[L'impact des relations extérieures entre l'Afrique subsaharienne et les États arabes du Golfe sur les migrants africains dans la région]* – Dès 1991, Ali Mazrui affirmait que la mer Rouge n'était pas adaptée pour séparer l'Afrique de l'Arabie. Car les deux étaient inextricablement liés à travers les langues, les religions (en particulier l'Islam) et les identités du Sahara et de la mer Rouge dans une fusion historique de l'arabisme et de l'identité africaine. Leur séparation est étroitement liée à une tendance plus large dans laquelle le monde blanc a resserré ses rangs et créé un système d'apartheid mondial. Les origines historiques de la fracture Afrique-Moyen-Orient, à savoir H. Les visions de la mer Rouge et du Sahara comme frontières raciales et civilisationnelles créées par l'idéologie européenne des Lumières et les premiers expansionnismes coloniaux ont été renforcées par les régimes autoritaires postcoloniaux et les rivalités de la guerre froide, ainsi que par les courants nationalistes en Afrique, au Moyen-Orient et en Afrique du Nord. L'Arabie saoudite et les Emirats arabes unis considèrent de plus en plus la Corne de l'Afrique comme leur « flanc de sécurité occidental ». Ils étaient unis dans leur désir d'empêcher l'influence croissante de la Turquie, de l'Iran et du Qatar dans cette partie du monde. Ces rivalités du Golfe ont constitué la base d'une coopération économique croissante avec l'ASS ainsi que d'alliances de soutien militaire et de sécurité, en particulier dans la Corne de l'Afrique. L'Arabie saoudite et les Emirats arabes unis, qui sont devenus ensemble les plus grands investisseurs du Golfe en Afrique, se font concurrence, notamment avec le Qatar, qui a établi des ambassades dans la plupart des pays d'ASS. En outre, des acteurs étatiques et non étatiques du Moyen-Orient et d'Afrique du Nord ont été étroitement impliqués dans la déstabilisation du Sahel dans les années 2010, notamment en fournissant un soutien militaire, de renseignement et idéologique aux États d'ASS et aux groupes terroristes. D'un autre côté, les États du Golfe sont devenus de plus en plus dépendants de la main-d'œuvre migrante et de l'augmentation constante de la migration de l'ASS vers ces pays, renforcée par l'afflux massif de pays africains d'origine des migrants compte tenu des restrictions imposées à la migration africaine vers l'Europe. Dès le VII<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C., l'Arabie s'appuyait fortement sur la traite des esclaves et sur l'offre de main-d'œuvre en provenance d'ASS, fondée sur la philosophie selon laquelle il était légitime d'asservir les Noirs parce qu'ils ne valaient pas mieux que des animaux. Durant cette période, l'Afrique noire est devenue le plus grand dépôt d'esclaves du monde islamique. A ce jour, il existe d'importantes communautés de migrants et de diasporas africaines au Moyen-Orient. Leur présence a parfois contribué à perpétuer des opinions et des attitudes désobligeantes de longue date à l'égard de l'Afrique et de ses peuples. Ces attitudes, fondées sur une hiérarchie sociale arabo-centrée et exprimant le mépris des cultures africaines, restent répandues aujourd'hui et façonnent les relations sociales entre employeurs et migrants africains dans les émirats de la péninsule arabique.

**Zusammenfassung :** *[Die Auswirkungen der Außenbeziehungen zwischen Afrika südlich der Sahara und die arabischen Golfstaaten über afrikanische Migranten in der Region]* – Bereits 1991 vertrat Ali Mazrui die These, dass das Rote Meer nicht dazu geeignet sei, Afrika von Arabien zu trennen. Denn beide waren durch Sprachen, Religionen (insbesondere den Islam) und Identitäten sowohl in der Sahara als auch im Roten Meer in einer historischen Verschmelzung von Arabismus und afrikanischer Identität untrennbar miteinander verwoben. Deren Trennung sei eng verbunden mit einem allgemeineren Trend, gemäß dem die weiße Welt ihre Reihen schloss und ein System der globalen Apartheid schuf. Die historischen Ursprünge der Kluft zwischen Afrika und dem Nahen Osten, d. h. die durch die Ideologie der europäischen Aufklärung und den frühen kolonialen Expansionismus geschaffene Sicht auf das Rote Meer und die Sahara als Rassen- und Zivilisationsgrenzen, wurden durch postkoloniale autoritäre Regime und Rivalitäten im Kalten Krieg sowie durch nationalistische Strömungen in Afrika, dem Nahen Osten und Nordafrika verstärkt. Saudi-Arabien und die Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate betrachteten das Horn von Afrika zunehmend als ihre „westliche Sicherheitsflanke“. Sie waren sich einig in dem Wunsch, den wachsenden Einfluss der Türkei, Irans und Katars in diesem Teil der Welt zu verhindern. Diese Rivalitäten am Golf bildeten die Grundlage für die wachsende wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit mit SSA sowie für militärische Unterstützungs- und Sicherheitsallianzen, insbesondere am Horn von Afrika. Saudi-Arabien und die Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate, die zusammen zu den größten Golfinvestoren in Afrika geworden sind, konkurrieren miteinander, insbesondere mit Katar, das in den meisten SSA-Ländern Botschaften eingerichtet hat. Zudem waren staatliche und nichtstaatliche Akteure aus dem Nahen Osten und Nordafrika in den 2010er Jahren eng an der Destabilisierung der Sahelzone beteiligt, unter anderem durch die Bereitstellung militärischer, geheimdienstlicher und ideologischer Unterstützung für SSA-Staaten und Terrorgruppen. Andererseits wurden die Golfstaaten zunehmend abhängig von Wanderarbeitskräften und der stetigen Zunahme der Migration aus SSA in diese Länder, verstärkt durch den massiven Zustrom aus afrikanischen Migranten-Entsendeländern angesichts der Einschränkungen afrikanischer Migration nach Europa. Bereits ab dem siebten Jahrhundert n. Chr. stützte sich Arabien stark auf den Sklavenhandel und die Bereitstellung von Arbeitskräften aus SSA, begründet mit der Philosophie, dass es legitim sei, schwarze Menschen zu versklaven, weil sie nicht besser als Tiere seien. In dieser Zeit wurde Schwarzafrika zum größten Sklavendepot der islamischen Welt. Bis heute gibt es im Nahen Osten bedeutende afrikanische Migranten- und Diasporagemeinschaften. Ihre Anwesenheit hat zeitweise dazu beigetragen, seit langem bestehende abwertende Ansichten und Einstellungen gegenüber Afrika und seinen Völkern aufrechtzuerhalten. Diese Einstellungen, die auf einer arabisch-zentrierten sozialen Hierarchie basieren und eine Verachtung gegenüber afrikanischen Kulturen zum Ausdruck bringen, sind bis heute vorherrschend und prägen die sozialen Beziehungen zwischen Arbeitgebern und afrikanischen Migranten in den Emiraten der Arabischen Halbinsel.